"MORE THAN A GAME:” LONGITUDINAL EFFECTS OF THE FIRST TEE LIFE SKILLS PROGRAMS ON POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The First Tee is a positive youth development program that seeks to promote personal skills like self-regulation, social responsibility, and sound decision-making, among others. The First Tee uses golf as a context and coaches as external resources to teach life skills (internal assets) to youth so that positive outcomes are maximized, such as the Nine Core Values of sportsmanship, respect, confidence, integrity, responsibility, judgment, courtesy, honesty, and perseverance. Because positive youth development refers to acquiring psychological and social skills that transfer to other domains (i.e., life skills), it is important to conduct research that tests this assumption. In 2005, we began a longitudinal research project to determine the impact of The First Tee life skills programs on positive youth development. We interviewed youth participants, coaches, and parents. Collective findings led us to conclude that The First Tee is having a positive impact by teaching youth life skills and core values. In 2006, we extended our initial findings in evaluating the effectiveness of The First Tee. One purpose was to assess retention of life skills knowledge and transfer from Year 1. A second purpose was to compare youth participants in The First Tee with youth in other organized activities (e.g., team and individual sports, band, YMCA, 4-H) on life skills transfer, general life skills usage, and developmental outcomes.

HOW DID WE CONDUCT THE STUDY?

To examine whether knowledge and transfer of life skills were sustained over time, we conducted interviews with 20 of the same participants from 2005. Interview questions were designed to assess whether and how they are using life skills in other domains and to compare responses to those in Year 1. For the second purpose, we went to 13 Chapters of The First Tee from across the United States and administered a survey to 533 youth (55 returnees from 2005; 478 new participants; ages 10-18). Youth participants were those who were regularly involved for at least one season in The First Tee Life Skills Experience. We also gave the survey to 159 youth (ages 10-17) who participated in at least one season in their specified activity (e.g., sports, band).

WHAT DID WE FIND?

First, we discuss the retention findings relative to life skills knowledge and transfer from interview data. Second, we provide findings comparing youth in The First Tee to youth not in The First Tee on life skills and outcomes based on survey data.

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Using STAR at School

“One of the biggest things with STAR is to sort of not get down on yourself...the acronym is to stop, think, anticipate, respond which helps you not make the same mistake twice...say, I get a poor grade on a test, by using STAR I can stay positive because I realize that it’s one grade and if I work hard and I get some other good grades...it can sort of cancel out and it’s not the end of the world.” (16-year-old boy)

Comparing Youth in The First Tee with Youth in Other Activities

Life Skills Transfer

Youth in The First Tee and comparison groups were assessed on the following life skills using a multi-item survey: meeting and greeting, managing emotions, goal setting, resolving conflicts, making healthy choices, appreciating diversity, helping others, and getting help from others. Participants were asked, “Because of participating in The First Tee (my activity)...” followed by a specific item (e.g., ...I calm myself down after receiving a bad grade,” “I set goals to achieve my personal best in school subjects”). Responses ranged from “really not true for me” to “really true for me” on a 5-point scale.

Youth in The First Tee scored significantly higher on 5 of 8 life skills: meeting and greeting, managing emotions, resolving conflicts, appreciating diversity, and getting help from others (see Figures 1 & 2). These findings provide support for the effectiveness of The First Tee curriculum and delivery in teaching life skills that youth successfully transfer to domains outside of the golf context. Groups did not differ on goal setting, making healthy choices, and helping others.

Figure 1: Life Skills Transfer

RETENTION OF LIFE SKILLS KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSFER

A total of 18 of 20 (90%) participants successfully demonstrated retention of life skills learned in the previous year. Likewise, they were able to effectively transfer the use of life skills to school (e.g., improve grades, prepare for tests), with family members (e.g., parents, brothers and sisters), with friends, doing team or individual activities, interacting with others at their job, contemplating a career, and engaging in youth organizations (e.g., volunteering, 4-H). The only major change in domain was job/college/career with a greater percentage of youth naming life skills in this area. Given that most participants were 15-18 years old, this shift makes sense because they were juniors and seniors in high school preparing for this area of their lives.

Themes for life skills were also retained over time, with participants naming STAR, the 4Rs and Be Patient, Be Positive, Ask for Help as strategies to control emotions, overcome challenges, and resolve conflicts. Using a Goal Ladder was the most frequent skill mentioned for goal setting. The following quotes illustrate successful transfer of these skills learned in golf to other life situations.
We also compared youth in The First Tee with youth in other activities on use of goal setting, initiative, emotional regulation, prosocial norms, and positive relationships in the context of their activity. Youth were asked, “Based on your involvement in The First Tee (your current program or most recent activity), please rate whether you have had the following experiences (e.g., “Learned about controlling my temper,” “I set goals for myself in this activity”). Responses were scored on a 4-point scale that included “not at all,” “a little”, “quite a bit”, and “yes, definitely.” Youth in The First Tee scored significantly higher on 5 of 8 general life skill dimensions: goal setting, initiative, emotional regulation, prosocial norms, and positive relationships (see Figure 3). Findings for emotional regulation and positive relationships support results for life skills transfer. Initiative experiences combine goal setting, problem solving, and time management; findings show that The First Tee life skills curriculum is successful in promoting initiative among participants, a skill beyond goal setting alone.

**Developmental Outcomes**

Youth in The First Tee were also compared to youth in other activities on outcomes such as perceived academic competence and social acceptance (confidence); respect, responsibility, honesty, and integrity (character); self-regulated learning and resisting peer pressure (judgment); and preference for challenge and commitment to their activity (perseverance). Youth in The First Tee scored significantly higher than youth in other activities on 7 of 10 outcomes: academic confidence, responsibility, honesty, integrity, resisting peer pressure, self-regulated learning, and preference for challenging skills (see Figures 4-5). Collectively, findings provide strong evidence that The First Tee curriculum and delivery is having a positive influence on teaching life skills and impacting youth development.
CONCLUSION

Findings support those from Year 1 in showing data-based evidence that The First Tee is having a significant impact on participants by teaching valuable life skills that are being transferred to a variety of life domains and situations. We found that domains and life skills usage were retained over time through vivid examples provided by youth participants. Also, youth in The First Tee compared favorably to youth involved in other activities on life skills transfer and general usage and developmental outcomes. Taken together, our results in 2006 strongly indicate that The First Tee is an effective youth program in attaining its goals of teaching life skills and promoting positive youth development.

THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST TEE

“I look at some of my friends and I’m so far ahead of them and they ask me why am I so confident and why am I so goal-oriented or why I am so set in life. I say The First Tee and that might sound like a corny response but they’re the reason why I’m on the right track and know where I’m going...The First Tee helps me get my mind straight and I always hear about new goals and setting new goals and where are you at right now and so I really like them kind of keeping me in check in where I’m at. I’m goal-oriented and I know where I’m going and it’s a great feeling. I’m just really thankful for what The First Tee has given me.” (16-year-old boy)